“Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner…”: The Impact of Home Visits on English Language Learners in a Multicultural High School

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Introduction: Two “Bad Dreams”

I have not seen the film, *The Sum of All Fears*, but I have lived it. My first semester World History class was comprised of 26 students, most of whom speak English as a first language. Of those 26 students, 15 of them failed the course. The reasons for these failures varied from attendance issues to lack of initiative to clinical depression. Nevertheless, they, and I, failed. One might even chalk up this failure to the perils of an inexperienced teacher. I’m not in experienced: I’ve been teaching for seven years; in fact, for the past three years I’ve served as a mentor to new teachers. So much for modeling.

At some point during that semester, one of the students in my other class, an Advanced Placement United States History class, made what he might say was a mistake; he moved into my neighborhood. One night after failing to reach the family by phone and growing weary of his intelligent underachiever routine, I decided to pay young Peter1 a visit – unannounced. Armed with my grade book and some examples of Peter’s underachievement, I rang the doorbell. A man answered the door – not Peter’s father, but a friend of the family living in the house. Yes, Peter lived there, and no, he wasn’t home, but his mother was. She was napping at the time and didn’t come downstairs for some time, but the family friend knew quite a bit about Peter. By the time Peter’s mother came downstairs, it was like three old friends catching up. I got my message across about what I hoped to see from Peter in the future, and they were able to talk to his teacher for an extended period of time own their own “turf”. I left with a plate full of food and sense of a job well done.

The next day Peter’s English teacher asked her class to give her an example of time when they had been surprised. It didn’t take long for Peter to respond that he had had such a surprise just the night before when his teacher visited his home. I think he described the incident as a “bad dream”, but as his teacher relayed the story to me, what she emphasized was the pride Peter seemed to take from my surprise visit. No, he certainly wouldn’t have chosen such a surprise, but he seemed pleased that his teacher thought enough to visit him in his home on his own time.

My success with that initial visit to Peter’s house and the abomination of that first semester World History class led me to this project: studying the impact of home visits on a class of English language learners (ELLs).

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1 All names of students have been changed to fictitious names in this paper
The class with which I conducted my research was my 2nd second semester World History class. Of those 21 students, 20 were born in another country, and all of them speak Spanish at home, except for one Vietnamese student. The second semester began at the end of January and ran until the middle of June. The class met during third Period, which met for 85 minutes each day; the period was split in half by a lunch period.

What (Some of) the Literature Says

There is considerable evidence that parent involvement leads to improved student achievement, better school attendance, and reduced dropout rates, and that these improvements occur regardless of the economic racial, or cultural background of the family. (Flaxman & Inger, 1991). At the same time, many Latino parents are reluctant to visit their children’s schools, leading to a lack of involvement on the part of such parents (Nicolau & Ramos, 1990).

Home visits, then, are one way to bridge the gap. Much of the research that has been done on home visits has looked at their impact on younger students (Ascher, 1998; Flaxman & Inger, 1991; Greenwood & Hickman, 1991). Nevertheless, strong parent-teacher connection benefits students at many grade levels (Hickman, Greenwood, & Miller, 1995). The work of Geni Cowan has shed some light on the impact of home visits. In an evaluation of the home visit program implemented by Sacramento Unified School District, she found that there were sharper increases in the test scores of schools participating in the program than in those that did not. While improved test scores cannot be directly attributed to home visits by teachers, 4th grade scores on the Stanford Achievement Test – 9th Edition in Sacramento Unified rose during the year when that district implemented a home visit program; scores in reading and math increased by an average of 6.5 and 9.8 percentage points respectively, while scores in math increased by an average of 9.8 percentage points (Sandham, 1999); The success of the Sacramento home visitation program led to California’s implementation of legislation paying teachers statewide to conduct home visits (Sandham, 1999).

A few authors have looked at the importance of home visits to Latino families. (Flaxman & Inger, 1991; Nicolau & Ramos, 1990). Here is one finding expressed by Morton Inger:

The hardest part of building a partnership with low-income Hispanic parents is getting parents to the first meeting…The only successful approach is personal: face-to-face conversations with parents in their primary language in their homes…Home visits not only personalize the invitations but help school staff to understand and deal with parents’ concerns’ (Inger, 1992)
Both the Hispanic Policy Development Project as well as the National Council of La Raza have conducted studies/projects on increasing Latino parent involvement and the possible role of teacher home visits.

Methodology
This study was a qualitative one from the start. It would be hard to measure the outcome of these home visits in any quantifiable way. I understand that it is the intangible things educators do which often impact the students the most—many times in ways students are not aware of when they are in the teacher’s care. Certainly, one concrete result I sought was for more students to pass the class than had done so during the previous semester. On a grander scale, I hoped to send the message to the students that they have a teacher (I believe there are several at Bell) willing to go the extra mile for them; their job, in turn would be to meet me halfway. Part of what I feel is a measurable outcome might be the graduation rate of those 21 students two years from now. However, this project focuses on look closely at how the process of home visits was implemented.

Walking the Walk, Talking the Talk
When I was a junior in college (10 years ago!), I spent a semester in Mexico living with a family and studying Spanish language and Mexican culture. I have a decent accent, but my vocabulary is limited and I function mainly in the present and past tense. In a word (or three): I get by. Part of the idea of the home visits was to let my students and their families see me struggling with their native language on their home turf just as they struggle with English in school and in the community. I have enough confidence in my Spanish, however, to know that I can communicate the main points I wanted to get across about how the class and engage parents in a conversation.

The one Vietnamese household presented a special challenge. I felt that having a student translate for me in only one of the 21 households would be fine. The student in question had a mild speech impediment and struggled grandly with English. Having him translate for me would serve as an opportunity to empower him.

Getting Started
To begin the project, I simply had an informal talk in class with the students about my idea of visiting them in their homes. The initial reaction I remember is one of groans. I followed up that talk with a more formal explanation of why I wanted to visit their homes. I told them about the first semester debacle, and I explained my belief that their parents are my partners in their education. Without their help, I stressed, much of what we do in class would be lost. On that same day I passed out an in-class survey (see appendix) to ascertain the basic information of where they live, when they and/or an adult are home. I emphasized my intent to speak with their parents, not the students themselves (“Hey, I see you guys everyday…”); the students could circle on the survey whether or not they wished to be home when I made the visit.
In the middle of the survey, I asked them what their initial reactions to the idea of me visiting were: “good idea, bad idea, or doesn’t matter”. All but a handful of the students circled “good idea”—I suspect because they had just heard me explain why I thought it was a good idea. In a 10-minute post survey writing assignment about their reactions, many students repeated the reasons I gave for the visit. Overall, students seemed to understand my “project” as an attempt to better get to know and help them. The following is one of the initial in-class reactions written just after our talk and the completion of the survey. This response was written by Olivia, a native of El Salvador who has been in the country for less than three years. I have kept her mechanical mistakes intact:

My first reaction to the idea of Mr. Hunt coming to my home is that it is a good idea, at a certain point. I think that my mom would feel more comfortable when she comes to school to ask for my grades to the teacher. And at certain point I wasn’t sure about Mr. Hunt coming to my house because I have a lot of brothers and sister, and cousins. So, I think he might get frustrated for be in my house.

Mr. Hunt says he wants to come because he wants to meet my parents and become friend, so they can work together for me having a good education. I think that Mr. Hunt is doing the right thing because teacher can work better for their students by knowing something about them and by having support by their parents or responsibles. It also going to help me to have a better relation with him and have more attention from my Mom.

Soon after having students fill out the survey and the expository responses, I started making appointments by phone. This step proved to be more time-consuming than I had expected. Some parents, for example, are not home until late at night. Another student does not live with his parents at all, even though his father lives in the city. That student wasn’t sure what the point of speaking with his father was since his father, according to the student, pays little attention to the student’s schooling.

I made the phone calls in Spanish. Since I am intimidated by phone calls in Spanish, I tried to dictate the conversation; I introduced myself, explained my intention to visit all of the families of my students in order to create the partnership I’d mentioned to the students. I quickly asked if there would be a time soon when I could visit. I can think of no parents who offered objections—only some who expressed reservations about the timing of the visit. When I offered options, even the weekends, there was no resistance.

Here’s an excerpt from my notes:

I started the first of my calls home tonight to ask permission to visit from the parents…I thought about using the translation service, but I thought that would seem weird – especially since I’m coming over the speak in Spanish – so I might as well do the call that way. I tried to do most of the talking since I usually have trouble understanding Spanish over the phone.
All of the parents with whom I spoke agreed the visit after the only the most cursory of explanations...I identified myself, explained that I was interested in visiting my students’ homes in order to ‘mantener una relacion con sus padres’...I hung up the phone excited and ready to make more calls.’

Hunt in the House
Each visit was unique, but all took on similar patterns. I had told the students that I did not intend to visit empty-handed and that I would come bringing student work and food. In some cases I prepared food myself at home; in other cases, I brought store-bought goodies. The food served to break the ice and make or a more cordial visit; the student work functioned as a way to really show parents what kind of things go on in the class. In some cases I was able to take the work of the student whose house I was visiting; in other cases I simply took quality work done by other students. The food and student work were an effective combination.

In all but two of my visits, the student was home, so I had an opportunity to reinforce some of the messages I had given to students previously. Also, if I had trouble understanding or being understood, the student could assist me.

However, even with a student present homemade vegetarian chili, the very first visit was a bust – in part because of my failure to communicate effectively. The father answered the door and right away went back to his home improvement project in the basement. The student was home, but I hadn’t come to speak with her. I wasn’t sure whether or not to ask the dad for his time right then, so I asked when the mother would be home and promised to return at that time. No one answered the door when I returned. That student was pregnant at the time and gave birth in April. She did not return to school after having her baby.

The second visit was more successful, but only marginally so:

I met with Maria, her brother and a woman I assume was the grandmother [turned out to be the aunt – oops]. Her brother just had surgery and was laying on the couch. I seem to have trouble explaining why I’m visiting. I got the message across, but it took time. Sometimes I got the blank stare of ‘I’m being polite but I don’t know what you’re saying.’ I was annoyed as I talked that Maria and she kept her eyes on the TV; finally her mom told her to turn it down (I don’t remember if they actually turned it off). I had real trouble explaining what Maria has left to do on [our oral history project]. I think Maria is a student who struggles with her classes, isn’t especially enthusiastic about them, and lacks self-confidence – so she ends up sulking and sucking her teeth. I think she’s gotten away with saying ‘I don’t know’in class”.

I can think of only one instance when I made an unannounced, unscheduled visit: this particular male student was failing the class and had told
me that he would be out of class for the next couple of days in order to get an operation. Not wanting to wait for two more days of failure to go by, I called his home that night. No answer. Hoping that someone would be home despite the unanswered calls, I drove to the neighborhood (Adams Morgan), bought myself dinner at the Kentucky Fried Chicken, and ate it on the stoop of his apartment building until someone either came in or out of the building. Just as I was finishing up my two-piece meal, a woman approached the apartment building prepared to enter. After introducing myself, I learned that she is the mother of another Bell student and knew the family I was visiting. She very graciously let me into the building. My strategy had worked! Some might call this technique “stalking;” I like to think of it as “aggressive education.”

Parents expressed appreciation for the opportunity to see their students’ work. They also expressed gratitude for my efforts to come to their homes. Only one student had ever had a teacher visit her home in the past. One parent was almost speechless in his expression of that gratitude. After finishing with the main points of my “presentation”, I talked each family what questions they had. Most had very few questions; they seemed satisfied with the information I had provided. Were my Spanish better, I think I could have coaxed more questions from them. I did not -- but should have-- surveyed students immediately after the visit about their own thoughts on how the visits went.

Results

Of the original 21 students, 19 remained in the class by the end. I visited 15 homes in all. I plan to visit the remaining 6 homes this summer if only to finish what I started; I do not wish to send the message to some students that I just didn’t “get around” to their homes. My strategy for those final visits will be somewhat different: the parents will have report cards by that time, and I have the students’ final portfolios and final exams. I will show the portfolios and exams to the parents so they can see the quality of work that begot those grades.

Of the six students whose homes I did not visit, one earned an A and only one did not pass the course; the others had grades covering the rest of the spectrum. Of the total class, four failed: Mileydi, whose house I visited first and who dropped out in April; Rosa, who never returned after having her baby; Emeterio, who had announced his own failure and practiced what he preached with his attendance, and Ronaldo, who managed to make it through the semester without turning in a single piece of written work done at home.

Overall, my second semester class had much better success than did my first semester students. 17 of the original 21 students passed the course. Although many of them passed with a “D”, I had two A’s (I’m reported to be a hard teacher) and more B students than usual. Many of those students still have a long way to go with regard to English proficiency, but I aimed the home visits more at increased motivation than improved language acquisition.
Final Reflections

Just as Professor Cowan could not conclude that the Sacramento home visits program was directly responsible for the increase in SAT-9 test scores, I cannot say that my visits were responsible for the much-improved pass rate between the first 1st and 2nd semester classes. Unfortunately, I believe that the preponderance of students who native English speakers in the 1st semester class was a part of the reason for failure. Many of those students, who have been in American (D.C.) schools all their lives have learned bad habits. Many of the students in that second semester class still have the high academic motivation seen historically among many recent immigrant groups. As I told the parents of those students during my visits, that class is “special”; those students fed off each other's positive energy, while the first semester class fed off negative energy. I’d like to read some of the literature on differences in academic motivation and achievement between native English speakers and English language learners in multicultural high schools.

As I wrote previously, I had hoped to send students the message that I was willing to go the extra mile with the hope that they would meet me halfway. What does that mixed metaphor mean? Quite simply, I hoped that they would work a little bit harder in school as they saw a teacher modeling that extra effort for them. I did see some isolated examples of extra effort from some students; more than at short-term “evidence”, this was a project aimed at long-term, outcomes, especially their graduation from high school.

At the end of the year, the class and I planned a celebration of Project P.R.I.D.E. (Parents’ Roots Inspire a Dedication to Education), the oral history project students completed at the start of the semester. With the help of the school’s community service coordinator, students raised money, made invitations, and prepared a menu, helped prepare food and decorated the room. The celebration took place on the last Friday of the year at night. 10 of the 21 students attended and they brought the person they interviewed for the project and, in some cases, other members of the family. In one case, a mother came without her son, who had to work that night. As we ate, each student stood up to introduce the family member s/he had interviewed and to explain the main thing the student had learned by completing the project. Such a celebration might not have been possible without the foundation laid down by the home visits.

Perhaps the outcome about which I am most proud at the moment is Olivia’s acceptance to the Junior Statesman program at Stanford University this summer. It was Olivia who whose written reaction I included earlier in the paper, and it was during my visit to her home that I first introduced the program to her mother and encouraged Olivia to apply. Olivia will be studying Advanced Placement Government and Public Speaking with other bright high school students during the month-long program. Olivia has only been in the country for a couple of years; she is quite gifted, but this program will be quite a challenge for her, given her stage of English proficiency; at the same time, however, the program – by immersing her in a serious academic (university) setting surrounded by other bright, motivated students – will provide the kind of challenge that Olivia does not get on a day-to-day basis at our school. I’d like to
think that my visit to her home played a significant role in Olivia’s decision to apply. I’d also like to think that Olivia’s acceptance to the Junior Statesman program and success of the Project P.R.I.D.E. celebration represent the kind of special outcomes possible from teacher home visits. As for the rest of the class, I look forward to building on the foundation laid by these initial visits, and I hope that, for these English language learners, the home visits will play a small part in encouraging them to go the “extra mile” toward their high school graduation and beyond.

References


Appendix

PRE-HOME VISIT SURVEY

Your name: ______________________________

Your address: __________________________________________________

How many people usually live in your house (including you)? ______

Who are the adults (people 18 years of age or older) in your home (not including you)?

Name: ________________________ relationship to you:________________________

Name: ________________________ relationship to you:________________________

Name: ________________________ relationship to you:________________________

Is there anyone in your home during the day (8am – 4pm) during the week?  Y / N

If “yes”, who? _______________________

When is (s)he home? ______ am / pm until ______ am / pm

What time do the adults in your home usually go to work?  NA

Name : _______________________ time (s)he leaves ______ am / pm

Name : _______________________ time (s)he leaves ______ am / pm

What time do the adults in your home return from work?  NA

Name: __________________________; time (s)he returns ______ am / pm

Name: __________________________; time (s)he returns ______ am / pm
Do you usually eat dinner with other people in your family? Yes / No

Other than homework, what are your responsibilities after school?

Work

Other (explain): ________________________________

At what time do you usually return home from school / work during the week?

Day of the week: ________________ ; ____________ am / pm
Day of the week: ________________ ; ____________ am / pm
Day of the week: ________________ ; ____________ am / pm
Day of the week: ________________ ; ____________ am / pm
Day of the week: ________________ ; ____________ am / pm

When are you and at least one (other) adult in your family home at the same time?

Day: ___________________ Time: ______________ am / pm
Day: ___________________ Time: ______________ am / pm
Day: ___________________ Time: ______________ am / pm
Day: ___________________ Time: ______________ am / pm
Day: ___________________ Time: ______________ am / pm

Day: ___________________ Time: ______________ am / pm

THE WEEKEND

“I am usually home from ______ am / pm until ______ am / pm on Saturday and from ______ am / pm until ______ am / pm on Sunday. There is usually at least one adult in my home from ______ am / pm until ______ am / pm on Saturday and from ______ am / pm until ______ am/ pm on Sunday.”
What is your first reaction to the idea of Mr. Hunt coming to visit your home?

Good idea  Bad idea  No problem  Not sure

Has a teacher ever visited your home before? Yes / No

If so, who?________________________  When?

If so, who?________________________  When?

How was that experience (visit)?  Good   /  Bad  /   OK  /   Don’t remember

Do you want to be there when I come to visit?

Good idea /  Bad idea /  Doesn’t matter

What should I talk about with the adult(s) in your home when I get there?

_____  “The Grading Standards”
_____ How you’re doing in class at the time
_____ Our class routine (what we usually do in class)
_____ Our projects (present and future)
_____ Other (explain):

With whom would you prefer that I talk?

Name: _______________________________________

Name: _______________________________________

Is there an adult outside of your home with home you would prefer that I meet?

Name: _______________________________________
Relationship with you: ________________________________

What should I bring with me when I come to visit?

_____ Your work (good and not-so-good)
_____ Information about what we’re doing in class
_____ Other (explain):

_________________________________________________________________

Is it OK if I bring food? Yes / No

_____ Mr. Hunt’s Famous Peach Salsa
_____ Mr. Hunt’s Famous Chili
_____ Mr. Hunt’s Famous Lasagna

Thank you very much for your time.